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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DOHA 001715

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STATE FOR NEA/PD, NEA/ARP  
INFO NSC FOR ABRAMS, DOD/OSD FOR SCHENKER AND MATHENY  
LONDON FOR ARAB MEDIA OFFICE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/30/2011  
TAGS: [KPAO](#) [PREL](#) [QA](#) [ALJAZEERA](#)  
SUBJECT: AL JAZEERA ENGLISH HEAD OF NEWS CAUTIOUSLY  
OPTIMISTIC, SEEKS FEEDBACK

REF: DOHA 1659

Classified By: Ambassador Chase Untermeyer, reasons 1.4 (b&d)

1. (U) PAO met December 6 with Ibrahim Helal, Deputy Managing Director for News and Programming of Al Jazeera English (AJE). The Egyptian-born Helal is 36 years old and worked as program editor for the Al Jazeera Arabic (AJA) channel from its founding in 1996 until 1999. He then worked for Abu Dhabi TV as head of news from 2000 to 2001, before returning to AJA as editor-in-chief. He left AJA when current AJA MD Wadah Khanfar took over the reins in 2003 and worked at the BBC World Service Trust as Project Director for the Middle East and North Africa, where he was responsible for training and development of Arab media organizations. He joined AJE in May 2006.

2. (U) When asked for his assessment of AJE's performance so far, Helal said cautiously "so far, so good," but that he was reluctant to pronounce "so soon" (Per reftel, AJE launched three weeks ago, on November 15). He was anxious to hear PAO's assessment of AJE's performance so far. PAO said it was early days yet, but the launch seemed to have gone very well and the overall reaction in international media to date seemed to have been positive. She noted that AJE has certainly delivered on its promise to bring news of "the South to the North", with its extended focus on developing country issues, and asked to what extent Helal thought this sort of focus may prove alienating to broader international audiences.

3. (U) Helal agreed it was a danger (making specific reference to a current, very extended, series of programs on the problem of malaria) and said that part of AJE's balancing act at this point is to ensure that it has specific objectives for its "South to North" programming. Some of the program editors are so eager to fulfill this mandate, that they do not question what the specific objectives may be. AJE has to consider the ethical lines in question here, he said. A television station cannot set itself up to act as a political tool in order to force change in any arena -- that would take it beyond its journalistic mandate. Helal said this was an issue he had had with Al Jazeera Arabic -- where many of the reporting and editorial staff wanted to be perceived as activist and to feel activist, but in the last analysis, had no coherent specific objectives behind their programming and editing choices, not to mention the fact that activism runs counter to TV journalism imperatives.

Middle East coverage

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¶4. (U) A large part of AJE's strength will be the texture it brings to coverage of Middle East issues, which, because of their potential and actual impact, are actually international, rather than regional issues, Helal said. Taking the recent assassination of Pierre Jemayl in Lebanon as an example, Helal said that AJE was able to bring a much more accurate sense of the Lebanese realities to the English-speaking screen, highlighting complexities that are glossed over by Western media. But "is it too much for the average viewer?" he worried. Does the average viewer want that level of detail?

Iraq  
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¶5. (C) PAO asked how AJE was managing Iraq coverage. Helal said AJE had asked the Al Maliki government for access and had spoken to "the Iranians" about the issue as well. He said the Iranians, who "seemed to be speaking for the Al Maliki government" gave a positive response to the AJE request, but so far permission from the Al Maliki government has not been forthcoming. Like AJA, he said, AJE can operate in the north of Iraq and otherwise procures footage from local production houses and manages quite a comprehensive coverage of events in Iraq from Doha. He asked PAO if the USG could help with getting Iraq access for AJE and PAO responded that that would be a decision for the Iraqi government to make.

Terrorist videotapes  
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¶6. (U) PAO asked what the AJE policy would be should it

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receive a tape from Al Qaeda and their ilk. Helal said AJE's policy would be the same as AJA's -- "if it is newsworthy, we will air it."

Personnel issues  
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¶7. (U) Helal noted that AJE is still about 20 percent under-staffed, which will affect its ability to switch to 24-hour live news coverage (Note: The channel launched with 12 hours of live news a day - noon to midnight GMT - and has now expanded to 17 hours, from 1000 GMT to 0300 GMT). He did not anticipate being able to reach 24-hour coverage before next February. He acknowledged difficulty with hiring Arab nationals to work at AJE. "We had PR about having 30 percent Arabs on our staff before launch, but we don't," he said. He estimated that Arab staff are less than 20 percent of news staff, and blamed stymied clearances by the Qatari Government -- few Arab candidates receive the OK from the GOQ internal security, he said.

Getting feedback  
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¶8. (U) Helal said the process of gathering feedback is largely done by AJE's PR department, who gather and analyze commentary, and share trends and specifics with the news staff. "We also have many friends at CNN, BBC and so forth, who let us know what they think," but no formal ratings data is available yet in the region. Helal saw that as something AJE would focus on at a later stage of its establishment. He claimed, laughing, that CNN and BBC had emergency strategy meetings when AJE launched, to assess the impact of the new channel and define strategies to meet its new challenge. He noted he was pleased with the lack of negative feedback from the Al Jazeera Arabic channel: "I know we have many, many enemies over there, and we would have heard right away if there had been problems" from their perspective with AJE's coverage of Middle East issues, he said.

## Interaction with AJA

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¶9. (U) He noted that interaction with AJA has proved fruitful for AJE so far. "We meet every day with their editorial team," he said. AJE did a recent special on Congo, which relied heavily on AJA access and contacts during its production. AJE has used AJA's Bahrain correspondent for actual reporting - "he happens to speak good English, and I thought, why not?" said Helal. Similarly, he said, AJE used a translated report from an AJA reporter "for variety" during recent events in Lebanon, and has also used some of AJA's exclusive footage.

## Assessment of Al Jazeera Arabic

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¶10. (U) PAO asked Helal how he saw AJA currently. He said AJA has made a lot of progress in the last few years in many areas, but still has work to do. It now has 75 reporters worldwide, for example. "That is huge," he said, and noted that problems with "TV-readiness" quality control therefore abound. He said AJA is very strict on accuracy and Doha staff review each AJA report for accuracy at several points before it goes to air - including having Doha staff edit the package if necessary just before it goes to air. At AJE, "we are not so strict. We trust our reporters," he said, adding that AJE field-produced segments frequently go directly to air with little or no Doha review. Therefore, he said, although the AJA reports are accurate, have all the right interviewees and present all the facts, they are written for newspaper or radio, they are not written for TV, he said.

## Comment

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¶11. (C) Helal appears young, energetic, knowledgeable and articulate and is clearly very much aware of the history Al Jazeera English is building upon and of the opposing pitfalls - among Middle Eastern and Western audiences alike -- facing the new channel. He was brought to AJE by Wadah Khanfar in May 2006 at the height of tensions between the Arabic and English channels, when significant numbers of the former were concerned that a "Westerner-run" AJE would hijack Al

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Jazeera's hard-won brand and Arab identity. His history with Al Jazeera Arabic and his strong regional/cultural credentials have no doubt been an important element in quieting those tensions. He will certainly have a key role in determining whether those tensions are eventually resolved or whether they flare up again. He urged PAO to keep in touch and not to hesitate to provide feedback at any time or to request clarification if something "does not appear clear."  
UNTERMEYER